# 'Our dear and well-beloved esquire': Robert Waterton and Henry V

***Summary***

*The honour of Pontefract was the largest and most valuable of all Duchy of Lancaster lordships in Yorkshire, and its political significance further increased after the duke of Lancaster usurped the throne in 1399. Robert Waterton (d.1425) served three Lancastrian kings as steward, constable and master forester of the honour of Pontefract, and has been described aptly as the 'lynch-pin'[1] of Duchy authority in Yorkshire. Aspects of Waterton's long career have featured in numerous publications, particularly those by the county's historical societies. This paper offers a focused discussion of his loyal service during the reign of Henry V, with a view to demonstrating Waterton's role in sustaining the local connection between the Duchy and its hereditary lord, the king, at a time when traditional ties were beginning to waver.*

Robert Waterton's career stands testimony to his impeccable record of Lancastrian service, which began in the household of the future King Henry IV, Henry earl of Derby, son and heir to John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster. One of Henry IV's few close friends, Waterton supported the usurpation of 1399 and worked for the security of the Lancastrian crown thereafter. A witness and executor of Henry IV's will, he served as a royal councillor, was sent on several embassies abroad and, though never knighted, became a prominent figure in the royal household as Henry IV's master of the horse and hunting dogs.[2] These aspects of Waterton's career suggest he cut a national and even international figure, as a right-hand man of the king. However, there is nothing to suggest that he neglected his numerous local duties within the Duchy of Lancaster, for which he served as chief steward of the North Parts (1407-1413); as steward and constable of the honour of Tickhill (from 1403); and as master forester (from 1391), constable and steward (from 1399/1400) of the honour of Pontefract.[3]

It was through his offices at Pontefract in particular that Waterton helped to uphold the crown's authority in Yorkshire. The steward's fundamental role as the lord's representative within the honour was significantly enhanced from 1399, given that the duke of Lancaster, now the king, had become a permanent absentee. Furthermore, from this date, the steward of Pontefract also enjoyed automatic appointment to the commission of the peace for the West Riding, which gave him influence beyond the honour's borders. But Waterton was more than just a servant in the employ of the king-duke, for he also helped to maintain local cohesion

within the honour. Vitally, Waterton integrated himself in local society through marriage, friendship and landholding, which further helped to reinforce his position as a local leader. Although he originally came from Lincolnshire, Waterton chose to make his home at Methley, some six miles from the honour's administrative centre.[4]

The honour of Pontefract covered a significant part of the old West Riding, encompassing major routes north and south, east and west. But the honour's political significance not only derived from its strategic location. Its consolidated geography overlay tight bonds of neighbourhood and kinship that prevailed among the honour's leading gentry families, many of whom demonstrated striking durability in their survival over multiple generations.[5] This longevity also mirrored a remarkable continuity of lordship, first under the de Lacys and then the house of Lancaster. Taken together, these factors encouraged long traditions of loyalty and service through membership of the Lancastrian affinity, the political clout of which was witnessed when the lord of the honour usurped the throne in 1399. At this critical juncture, the honour served as a well-spring of support, with several of Pontefract's leading landowners following Robert Waterton's example in helping their lord to seize power and to safeguard his throne thereafter.[6] This was especially pertinent given the divisions in Yorkshire that emerged in the early years of Henry IV's reign – divisions partly caused by the pre-eminence of those with the strongest Lancastrian connections.

While the Duchy provided Henry IV with vital manpower, wealth and influence, his possession of such a vast private inheritance proved something of a constitutional headache and caused resentment outside among those outside the Lancastrian affinity. In contrast to his father, Henry V saw the dangers of a king being over-reliant on private sources of power to support his public authority and so fostered a rather less intimate relationship with the Duchy.[7] But this shift is hardly surprising: although young Henry had been created duke of Lancaster in November 1399, his early political outlook and expectations were governed by his position as Prince of Wales, not simply as the heir to a great estate like his father had been. More fundamentally, Henry V did not face the same problems as his father and so did not have to rely on the support of the Lancastrian affinity to the same extent. Yet this is not to say that the Duchy was no longer significant after Henry V had succeeded in 1413. The new king made full use of the Duchy's assets, with its revenues contributing to the expenses of the royal household and foreign campaigns.[8] To this end, Henry took a personal interest in Duchy affairs, putting in place measures to improve revenue flow by limiting waste and fraud.

Furthermore, many of the Duchy's tenants and office holders still followed an inherited pattern of service to the house of Lancaster and fought for the king in France. Henry relied on this continuity of service in the early years of his reign and valued experienced men. But recognising the political dangers of too close an alliance with such men, Henry also drew on a wider pool of followers both to serve him and to benefit from his patronage, thereby creating a truly royal rather than partisan affinity. His reign saw an attempt to assimilate the Duchy into the body politic – to treat it as one resource among many.

Within the honour of Pontefract, however, the effects of this new attitude were not immediately seen. Traditional ties to the house of Lancaster were initially upheld thanks to Henry V's confirmation of fees and annuities originally granted by his father and, in some cases, even those given by his grandfather, John of Gaunt. Robert Waterton was awarded £100 p.a. from the Pontefract receipt alone, in addition to other sums paid from elsewhere.[9] Henry also occasionally used other forms of tangible patronage, drawn from the honour's demesne and feudal resources, for the benefit of local affinity members. Yet Henry granted no new annuities of his own, as he sought to limit expenditure on Duchy patronage. In this he was partly aided by the conveniently-timed deaths of many older annuitants: men such as Sir Roger Swillington of Swillington, the son of one of Gaunt's retainers, who died in 1417. Moreover, Swilington's own sons, Sir John (d.1418) and Sir Robert (d.1420), who had also each been granted fees charged to the Pontefract receipt by Henry IV, did not long outlive their father.[10] Though the Swillingtons offer a good example of intergenerational service and reward within the Lancastrian affinity, such formal bonds between the king-duke and his tenants within the honour were starting to wane. However, within the honorial context, what helped to compensate for a more impersonal style of royal lordship and the gradual erosion of the Lancastrian affinity was the continued presence of Robert Waterton as the representative of seigniorial authority.

On the death of Henry IV, Waterton lost the chief stewardship of the Duchy's North Parts, but was confirmed in his all of his offices at Pontefract (the master forestership becoming a life grant), and in 1416 he was also made chamberlain of the Duchy.[11] Thus, within the Duchy, his career continued to flourish. And yet it is clear that Waterton no longer enjoyed quite the same degree of national prominence he once had, or possessed such a close relationship with the king. This was possibly because Waterton was something of an embarrassment to Henry V. After all, Waterton had been intimately involved in the

usurpation of 1399, having been one of the first to greet Henry's father on the latter's return from exile. As constable of Pontefract and almost certainly an acquaintance of Richard II's actual gaoler, Sir Thomas Swynford, Waterton probably knew the truth of the deposed king's demise. Moreover, it was Waterton who spoke out in parliament to refute the incendiary rumours that the former king was still alive.[12] Waterton was also later accused by the Scottish chronicler, Walter Bower, of having counselled Henry IV to execute Archbishop Scrope (who was held at Pontefract after his arrest) in June 1405: a move which unwittingly helped to establish a popular cult utilised by opponents of the house of Lancaster.[13] Waterton had therefore been uncomfortably close to the more troubling episodes of Henry IV's reign for which Henry V wished to atone. Nevertheless, Waterton had proven himself to be a steadfastly loyal and capable servant of the Lancastrian dynasty. Though perhaps not one of Henry V's *familares*, as one of the king's 'dear and well-beloved' esquires (*notre chier et bien amé escuier*[14]) he was a man upon whom Henry V could still rely.

Henry evidently deemed Waterton to be a suitable guardian for Richard Plantagenet, third duke of York (1411-1460), whose father, the earl of Cambridge, had been executed in August 1415 for his part in the Southampton Plot. This conspiracy to depose Henry focused on the claim that Richard's maternal uncle, Edmund Mortimer, earl of March (who ironically had no part in the plot and even brought it to the king's attention) had a stronger dynastic right to the throne than Henry himself. This was based on the Mortimers' descent from Lionel of Antwerp, the third son of Edward III, as opposed to the Lancastrian claim which was based on descent from King Edward's fourth son, John of Gaunt: a fact Richard Plantagenet would later use in his own challenge to Henry VI. Soon after the loss of his father, Richard's paternal uncle, Edward, second duke of York died childless on the field of Agincourt in 1415, leaving Richard to inherit the duchy of York, in addition to the Mortimer lands and titles (Edward Mortimer died without issue in 1425). Considering the politically sensitive nature of this vast inheritance, it is hardly surprising that young Richard was placed in the custody of one so loyal to the house of Lancaster as Waterton was. On 9 March 1416, the four-year-old orphan duke arrived at Waterton's home at Methley, the king awarding £100 per annum for the duke's expenses.[15] He remained part of the Waterton household for the next seven years until his guardianship was transferred to the earl of Westmorland in December 1423.[16]

Although Waterton was tasked with diplomatic missions abroad in 1414 and 1416, his services to the crown were now more confined to the local and regional sphere. Nonetheless,

he was still in a position to support preparations for the renewal of the Hundred Years War. In May 1415, Waterton was named as one of the thirteen commissioners of array for the West Riding, a role he shared with members of other prominent duchy tenants, including Sir Robert Rockley, William Gascoigne and John Wortley of Wortley.[17] They were tasked with raising troops for the defence of the coast against invasion while Henry was in France. Meanwhile, a number of men with landed interests in the honour of Pontefract served in Henry's French campaigns, which resulted in heavy losses among the local elite. The duchy annuitant, Sir John Swillington, was at Agincourt and subsequently part of the 1417 expedition.[18] His brother and fellow annuitant, Sir Robert, was at Pontoise in 1419 but died in the fighting at Melun in October 1420.[19] Sir William Gascoigne, son of the former lord chief justice, and Sir Robert Plumpton were both killed at the siege of Meaux in March 1422 – the same siege where Henry V contracted the illness that killed him – while Sir Brian Stapleton died at Alençon in 1417 and John Fitzwilliam at Rouen in 1421.[20] Others were more fortunate. Nicholas Wortley, possibly son of the aforementioned John Wortley, was a man at arms under the command of the duke of York in 1415 and survived. The Lancashire knight and former sheriff of Yorkshire, Sir William Harrington, who appears to have held some land in the honour prior to acquiring a number of significant estates there through his wife in *c.*1424, served as Henry's standard bearer at Agincourt and at the siege of Rouen in 1419. Other people mentioned in the available sources are difficult to identify with any certainty. There is, for example, mention of a 'Robert Rokley' at Agincourt. On the grounds of age alone, this was unlikely to have been Sir Robert Rockley, the aged Lancastrian retainer who witnessed Robert Waterton's enfeoffment in 1414 before dying the following year. But it might have been his son and namesake, who outlived his father by just three years. The Robert Hopton who served as a man at arms in the retinue of Lord Richard Scrope of Bolton, may have been Robert Hopton of Wortley (Armley) who became MP for Yorkshire in 1433.[21]

As a figurehead for ducal/royal authority, Waterton was charged by the king in 1420 to induce the Yorkshire gentry to fight abroad: a fact which testifies to Waterton's perceived local influence. Waterton wrote back to Henry saying that he would labour over the task 'dayly wyth all my might' and that he would use the commissions of the peace and of gaol delivery at York 'to speke with many of the gentils there'.[22] And yet, despite Waterton's apparent eagerness to serve his royal master, the call to arms did not attract a positive response. Anthony Goodman's study of the very faded roll listing excuses of military service

by the Yorkshire gentry shows that of ninety-six men questioned, only fifteen pledged their service.[23] Years of warfare on the continent and demands of service in Scotland had taken their toll; though, to his credit, Waterton was actually more successful than commissioners in some other counties. Of those who excused themselves from service, eleven were gentlemen resident within the honour. One might have thought that the gradual erosion of the Lancastrian connection had some bearing on the situation, making men reluctant to fight for their lord, but the evidence in fact suggests otherwise. Within the honour, as in the county, financial difficulties and sickness (both often connected to previous military service) were the most common excuses. That five local men offered to club together to provide a substitute suggests genuine difficulties rather than disinterest. Across the county at large, moreover, the fact that six of the fifteen who pledged to serve came from the West Riding again indicates the continued influence of Waterton and the Duchy connection.[24]

By this stage of his life, Waterton's own soldiering days were over. He had relinquished the office of Master of the Horse to his brother John, who had the unenviable task of organising the horses, baggage and equipment of Henry V's 926-strong personal retinue.[25] Yet Robert Waterton could still contribute to the war effort through his control of Pontefract Castle, which had a long-held reputation as a fortress. A significant amount of building work was undertaken at Pontefract and other Duchy castles in this period, reflecting their enhanced roles. As well as being a royal armoury, Pontefract Castle was also a prison for a number of French noblemen captured at Agincourt. The first and most notable of these high-ranking prisoners was Charles, duke of Orléans, who was sent to Pontefract in June 1417.[26] The considerable cost of keeping Orléans and his compatriot, the duke of Bourbon, was met by the Duchy. In 1418/19, a daily allowance of 20s was approved for Orléan's at Pontefract (amounting to £365 p.a.).[27] However, Orléans was not always confined within the castle walls but was allowed out to hunt and invited to spend time at Methley. It has been suggested that the 'lavish' lifestyle evident in the Waterton household accounts (Sept. 1416 – Sept. 1417) could be connected with the duke's presence.[28] Moreover, mention of the word 'hagnonayse' in the accounts of the Waterton household in the 1440s – more than a century before hogmanay was widely celebrated in England – has led to speculation that it could have been introduced through French influence.[29]

The apparent friendship between Waterton and his prisoner became a political issue when, in 1418, news reached the king of a Scottish plot to free the duke. In letter written in his own

hand, Henry ordered that Orléans 'be kept stille within the castil of Pontfret with owte goying to Robertis place or to any other disport' remarking that it was better that the duke 'lak his disport then we were disceyved'.[30] This letter was undated and possibly never even sent. But Henry's concerns over the freedoms afforded Orléans seem to have persisted, for in October 1419, he ordered his chancellor, the bishop of Durham, to ascertain if Waterton was keeping the duke securely and to rectify the situation if needed.[31] It seems that the bishop's findings did nothing to alleviate the king's anxieties on that score for Orléans was removed from Waterton's custody just two months later.[32] Arrangements were made for the duke of Bourbon to be kept at Pontefract instead, but he too was sent elsewhere before his release in July 1420.[33] Orléans, meanwhile, would remain a prisoner in England until 1440.

Despite Waterton's possible error of judgement over Orléans, his reputation as a gaoler was not irreparably damaged. In February 1419, he took charge of the count of Eu, Arthur of Brittany, and the marshal Buchechaud, the latter dying at Pontefract two years later.[34] Arthur of Brittany left Pontefract after just little over a year, for in May 1420 Waterton's servant, John Greenfield, had the task of transporting Arthur to London.[35] Interestingly, Waterton's own detailed accounts, which cover the period 12 February 1419 to 1 May 1423, show that the party set out from Methley rather than from Pontefract. Waterton subsequently had custody of Perron de Lupe and Cuchart de Sesse, who were captured at Meaux in 1422 and delivered into the constable's hands that summer. Although no mention appears in Waterton's accounts, in May 1422, an order was given for another long-standing prisoner of the king, Raoul de Gaucourt, defender of Harfleur, to be sent to Pontefract.[36]

As far as the wider Duchy was concerned, the death of Henry V in August 1422 created far greater shock waves then that of his father had nearly a decade previously. The succession to the throne of the nine-month-old Henry VI dashed any hope of direct royal lordship, which damaged the Duchy's political significance as a conduit for service, patronage and influence, while Henry V's complicated settlement of the Duchy in trust resulted in considerable administrative changes. On Duchy lands in Yorkshire, however, it largely seems to have been a case of business as usual. Seemingly with a view to ensure local stability, Robert Waterton was confirmed in his offices at Pontefract in October 1422 and his duties remained the same. In May 1423, Waterton petitioned the royal council to be reimbursed for outstanding expenses incurred for the continued care of French prisoners. The council responded very quickly, for that same month a warrant for the full amount – £276 6s 10d – was issued.[37] In

addition to Frenchmen, by 1424 Waterton was responsible for a number of Scottish hostages, including the son of the earl of Athol, who were held as part of the agreement for the return of King James I to Scotland.[38] Pontefract had been chosen as the location where James could meet the Scottish ambassadors sent to negotiate his release, with Waterton being among the commissioners appointed to treat with the Scots in July and December 1423.[39]

Waterton's involvement in this business with Scotland was among his last official duties in his long years of service to the house of Lancaster. When he died on 17 January 1425, Waterton had been part of the honorial administration for over thirty years – a figure of constancy during a period that saw many upheavals. Given the importance of the honour as a focus for community, his loss was a significant blow. Indeed, it was only after his death that the Lancastrian connection was truly undermined and a political vacuum threatened to emerge. Thanks to the reduction of the Lancastrian affinity, there were no suitable members of the local gentry to take his place, which contributed to the subsequent imposition of external magnate stewardship in the form of the Nevilles of Middleham.[40] As to Waterton's own view of his career, his will may hold a clue. Written just seven days before his death, it includes a bequest of 24 marks per annum for three chaplains to pray for three souls besides his own; namely, that of his wife, of his friend Henry IV, and remarkably – despite his unswerving political loyalties, visually evidenced by the Lancastrian collar of esses on the funerary effigies of himself and his wife – the soul of Richard II.[41] However, no mention is made of his more recent master, Henry V. Whilst Waterton served both father and son loyally, it seems he felt warmth for only one Henry. Yet he may have had more in common with Henry V in wishing to make amends for what happened to Richard II in the name of securing the Lancastrian throne. A conscience pricked perhaps?

## References

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